

Jorge Luis Borges

An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain

Herbert Quain has just died at Roscommon. I was not astonished to find that the Times Literary Supplement allots him scarcely half a column of necrological piety, and that not a single laudatory epithet but is corrected (or seriously qualified) by an adverb. The Spectator, in its pertinent issue, is unquestionably less laconic and perhaps even more cordial, but it compares Quain's first book, *The God of the Labyrinth*, with a work by Mrs. Agatha Christie, and others with books by Gertrude Stein: evocations which no one would consider inevitable and which would not have gratified the deceased. Quain, for that matter, was not a man who ever considered himself a genius; not even on those extravagant nights of literary conversation on which a man who has already worn out the printing presses inevitably plays at being Monsieur Teste or Doctor Sam Johnson . . . He was very clear-headed about the experimental nature of his books: he thought them admirable, perhaps, for their novelty and for a certain laconic probity, but not for their passion.

"I am like Cowley's Odes," he wrote me from Longford on March 6, 1939. "I do not belong to Art, but merely to the history of art." In his mind, there was no discipline inferior to history.

I have transcribed one of Herbert Quain's modest statements. Naturally, this bit of modesty is not exhaustive of his thought. Flaubert and Henry James have accustomed us to suppose that works of art are infrequent and laboriously composed. The sixteenth century (we need only recall Cervantes' *Viaje al Parnaso*, or Shakespeare's destiny) did not share this disconsolate opinion. Neither did Herbert Quain. He thought that good literature was common enough, that there is scarce a dialogue in the street which does not achieve it. He also thought that the aesthetic act can not be carried out without some element of astonishment, and that to be astonished by rote is difficult. With smiling earnestness he deplored "the servile and obstinate conservation" of books from the past . . . I do not know if his vague theory is justifiable. I do know that his books are over-anxious to astonish.

I deeply lament having lent, irretrievably, the first book he published, to a female acquaintance. I have already said that it was a detective story. I may add that *The God of the Labyrinth* was issued by the publisher in the last days of November, 1933. During the first days of December of the same year, London and New York were enthralled by the agreeable and arduous involutions of *The Siamese Twin Mystery*. I prefer to attribute the failure of our friend's novel to this ruinous coincidence. Also (I wish to be entirely sincere) I would mention the deficient execution and the vain and frigid pomp of certain descriptions of the sea. At the end of seven years, it is impossible for me to recuperate the details of the action. But I will outline its plot, exactly as my forgetfulness now impoverishes (exactly as it now purifies) it. An indecipherable assassination takes place in the initial pages; a leisurely discussion takes place toward the middle; a solution appears in the end. Once the enigma is cleared up, there is a long and retrospective paragraph which contains the following phrase:

"Everyone thought that the encounter of the two chess players was accidental." This phrase allows one to understand that the solution is erroneous. The unquiet reader rereads the pertinent chapters and discovers another solution, the true one. The reader of this singular book is thus forcibly more discerning than the detective.

Even more heterodox is the "regressive, ramified novel" titled April March, whose third (and only) part is dated 1936. In judging this novel, no one would fail to discover that it is a game; it is only fair to remember that the author never considered it anything else.

"I lay claim in this novel," I have heard him say, "to the essential features of all games: symmetry, arbitrary rules, tedium." Even the title of the book is a feeble pun: it does not mean the march of April, but literally March-April. Someone has perceived an echo of Donne's doctrines; Quain's prologue prefers to evoke the inverse world of Bradley in which death precedes birth, the scar the wound, and the wound the blow (Appearance and Reality, 1897, page 215)<1> The worlds proposed by April March are not regressive; only the manner of writing their history is so: regressive and ramified, as I have already said. The work is made up of thirteen chapters. The first reports the ambiguous dialogue of certain strangers on a railway platform. The second narrates the events on the eve of the first act. The third, also retrograde, describes the events of another possible eve to the first day; the fourth, still another. Each one of these three eves (each of which rigorously excludes the other) is divided into three other eves, each of a very different kind. The entire work, thus, constitutes nine novels; each novel contains three long chapters. (The first chapter, naturally, is common to all.) The temper of one of these novels is symbolic; that of another, psychological; of another, communist; of still another, anti-communist; and so on. Perhaps a diagram will help toward comprehending the structure:

$$\begin{array}{l} / x 1 / y 1 < x 2 | \backslash x 3 | | / x 4 z < y 2 < x 5 | \backslash x 6 | | / x 7 \backslash y \\ 3 < x 8 \backslash x 9 \end{array}$$

Concerning this structure we might well repeat what Schopenhauer declared of the twelve Kantian categories: everything is sacrificed to a rage for symmetry. Quite naturally, some of the nine stories are unworthy of Quain. The best piece is not the one he originally planned, x 4; but rather one of a fantastic nature, x 9. Certain others are deformed by slow-witted and languid jests or by useless pseudo-exactitudes. Whoever reads the sections in chronological order (for instance: x 3, y 1, z) will lose the peculiar savor of this strange book. Two narratives - x 7, x 8 - lack individual worth; mere juxtaposition lends them effectiveness . . .

I do not know if I should mention that once April March was published, Quain regretted the ternary order and predicted that whoever would imitate him would choose a binary arrangement:

$$/ x 1 / y 1 < | \backslash x 2 z < | / x 3 \backslash y 2 < \backslash x 4$$

And that demiurges and gods would choose an infinite scheme: infinite stories, infinitely divided.

Highly diverse, but also retrospective, is the heroic comedy in two acts, *The Secret Mirror*. In the works already reviewed, the formal complexity had hindered the author's imagination; in this book, his evolution is freer. The first act (the most extensive) takes place at the country estate belonging to General Thrale, C.I.E., near Melton Mowbray. The invisible center of the plot is Miss Ulrica Thrale, eldest daughter of the general. She is depicted for us, through certain lines of dialogue, as an arrogant horsewoman; we suspect that she does not cultivate literature; the newspapers announce her engagement to the Duke of Rutland; the same newspapers deny the engagement. She is revered by a playwright, Wilfred Quarles; she has favored him, once or twice, with a distracted kiss. The characters possess vast fortunes and ancient blood; their emotions are noble, though vehement; the dialogue seems to vacillate between the mere verbosity of Bulwer-Lytton and the epigrams of Wilde or Mr. Philip Guedalla. There are a nightingale and a night; there is also a secret duel on a terrace. (Almost totally imperceptible, some curious contradiction exists, as do certain sordid details.) The characters of the first act appear in the second - bearing other names. The "dramatic author" Wilfred Quarles is a commission agent in Liverpool; his real name is John William Quigley. Miss Thrale really does exist; Quigley has never seen her, but he morbidly collects photographs of her from *The Tatler* or *The Sketch*. Quigley is author of the first act. The unlikely or improbable "country estate" is the Irish-Jewish boarding house, transfigured and magnified by him, in which he lives . . .

The texture of the acts is parallel, but in the second everything becomes slightly horrible, everything is postponed or frustrated. When *The Secret Mirror* opened, the critics pronounced the names of Freud and Julian Green. The mention of the first strikes me as totally unjustified.

Rumor had it that *The Secret Mirror* was a Freudian comedy; this propitious (and fallacious) interpretation determined its success. Unfortunately, Quain had already reached the age of forty; he was totally used to failure and he did not easily resign himself to a change of regime. He resolved to avenge himself. Toward the end of 1939 he issued *Statements*: perhaps the most original of his works, doubtless the least praised and most secret. Quain was in the habit of arguing that readers were an already extinct species.

"Every European," he reasoned, "is a writer, potentially or in fact." He also affirmed that of the various pleasures offered by literature, the greatest is invention. Since not everyone is capable of this pleasure, many must content themselves with shams. For these "imperfect writers," whose name is legion, Quain wrote the eight stories in *Statements*. Each of them prefigures or promises a good plot, deliberately frustrated by the author. One of them - not the best - insinuates two arguments. The reader, led astray by vanity, thinks he has invented them. I was ingenuous enough to extract from the third, "The Rose of Yesterday," my story of "The Circular Ruins."

<1> Woe to Herbert Quain's erudition; woe to page 215 in a book dated 1897! An interlocutor of Plato's Politician had already described a similar regression: that of the Sons of the Earth or Autochthons, who, subjected to the influence of an inverse rotation of the cosmos, passed from old age to maturity, from maturity to childhood, from childhood to

disappearance and nothingness. Theopompus, too, in his Philippics, speaks of certain boreal fruits which originate in those who eat them: the same retrograde process . . . It is even more interesting to imagine an inversion of Time: a state in which we remember the future, and know nothing, or barely feel a presentiment, of the past. Cf. the Tenth Canto of the Inferno, verses 97-102, where prophetic vision is compared to presbyopia.